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SUBJECT: LGBT FILM FESTIVAL FACES CONTINUED LOCAL HOSTILITY

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Last year's St. Petersburg LGBT (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender) community "Side-by-Side" film festival generated an intense media and political backlash, with access to several planned film venues repeatedly shut down due to strong political pressure. "Side-by-Side" organizers hope for better results for their film festival this year, and report that public discourse regarding homosexual rights is slowly spreading to a wider audience in the city. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) St. Petersburg's LGBT community developed the "Side-by-Side" international film festival in 2007 as a way to fight discrimination and to promote gay rights in the city. Their goal was to use film as a tool with which to challenge negative stereotypes of the LGBT community prevalent in St. Petersburg. Organizers planned to present both documentary and feature films, and, by reaching out to a large and varied audience, attempted to place the discussion of gay rights at the forefront of local discourse. At a meeting with both BPAO and Poloff, the festival's organizers discussed the string of difficulties they have experienced in this regard, and their plan for moving forward.

2008 Film Festival Plans Severely Disrupted

¶3. (SBU) As originally planned, the first Side-by-Side film festival was scheduled for October 4-5 in 2008, and Dom Kino, a well known and prominent movie theater in St. Petersburg, agreed to host the festival. However, the planned event produced a strong outcry in the local media. Nikolay Burlyayev, actor and president of the Association of Cinematographers for Slavic and Orthodox peoples, was quoted during this period as stating that the festival was a result of "the provocation of those who wish Russia to perish," and Burlyayev urged Governor Matviyenko to ban the festival outright.

¶4. (SBU) During the ensuing media storm, Dom Kino informed the organizers of Side-by-Side that it had to close for renovations and would no longer be able to host the festival. Off-the-record, however, as related to us by the Side-by-Side organizers, Dom Kino management revealed that pressure from the St. Petersburg Cultural Committee had caused its change of heart.

¶5. (SBU) The festival organizers then turned to another local theater, "Kinocenter Pik". Once again, soon after advertisements went up and tickets were sold, the theater informed "Side by Side" that technical difficulties would prevent them from hosting the festival. Like Dom Kino, Pik's director confided in the organizers that pressure from local authorities, and not technical difficulties, was the reason for the theater's decision.

¶6. (SBU) After deciding on smaller, and less prominent, venues, the Side-by-Side organizers turned to two local clubs and began again to advertise the event. This time, the festival was cancelled less than twelve hours before the first film was scheduled to screen when city firefighters arrived to shut down both clubs down because of various unspecified safety violations. Protesting these actions, the festival organizers attempted to hold an impromptu press conference, but claim they were prevented from doing so by local authorities.

¶17. (SBU) The organizers then rented two halls at the last minute, and advertised the new locations by word of mouth and text message only. Approximately 150 people attended each of the five films screened and the discussion sessions held afterwards.

¶18. (SBU) Since October 2008, Side by Side has continued to host films at various small, unpublicized venues, with advertising conducted mostly by word of mouth. Resistance and interference from local authorities has been minor and sporadic. Side-by-Side played a small role in the March 2009 anti-xenophobia film festival "Opened Eyes". The final day of the three day festival focused on the problem of discrimination against the LGBT community.

¶19. (SBU) Side-by-Side decided to take a more prominent role in the June 2009 "Festival of Festivals" film festival. However, theaters again balked at showing the Side-by-Side films shortly after the events were publicized. Dom Kino did show the originally planned five films, but only after Side-by-Side agreed to cease advertising for them. This led to smaller audience numbers at all showings, according to the organizers, and reduced the possibility of discussion between individuals with differing viewpoints on the issue of gay rights, which had been one of Side-by-Side's main objectives.

¶10. (SBU) Side-by-Side's organizers then requested a meeting with the St. Petersburg Cultural Committee to discuss their concerns about perceived discrimination. The cultural committee representatives stated they would not support any programming that could be viewed as encouraging homosexuality or a homosexual lifestyle. The organizers also were told that since their activities were not of "general interest" to the city, they would not be permitted to meet directly with the chair of the committee.

Organizers Working Proactively to Prevent a Repeat in 2009

¶11. (SBU) Side-by-Side organizers are searching for ways to offset possible interference by local authorities in this year's planned upcoming October film festival. The organizers currently plan to hold a seven day festival at seven different locations which they believe cannot be closed. Foreign consulates top their list of desirable venues, and Side-by-Side has been discussing the matter with the U.S., British, German, Swedish, and Norwegian consulates. The organizers also plan on participating in another film festival hosted by the German consulate in December.

¶12. (SBU) Side-by-Side, LGBT Network and the LGBT Organization "Coming Out" have recently written a letter to the Saint Petersburg Human Rights Ombudsman Mikhaylov, listing a range of abuses that they allege have been committed against LGBT organizations, businesses and persons. The letter calls for greater governmental attention to such abuses, and requests a meeting with and statement from the Ombudsman condemning the abuses.

¶13. (SBU) Additionally, Side by Side, with the support of LGBT Network, has written a letter to the Council of Europe's Commissioner of Human Rights. The letter details the various challenges they have faced in dealing with the local administration, and requests he issue a statement in support of the upcoming film festival. They have also asked the Commissioner to raise the issue with Vladimir Lukin, Ombudsman to the Russian Federation, during their meeting in Samara on September 3 and 4, 2009.

¶14. (SBU) The difficulties faced by Side-by-Side have focused local and national attention on the local LGBT community. Activists have become more visible since last year, and, in December 2008, the first LGBT NGO ("Coming Out") was registered. Coming Out has since published a regional report on the status of discrimination against the LGBT community. Lawyers from the St. Petersburg Human Rights Resources Center were able to assist

Coming Out through the registration process, and are working on helping another NGO, "Gender-L," to register as well.

¶15. (SBU) Comment. Ironically, local government pressures on the Side by Side film festival, along with media criticism of the group, actually seems to have aided the LGBT cause here. While the government and other groups might have hoped that blocking the festival would have a chilling effect on discussion of LGBT issues in St Petersburg, those efforts have been largely ineffective as the organizers continue to promote their festival. Also, the LGBT community now has its own NGO to help fight for LGBT rights and document discrimination within the city. We are working with Side by Side to host a film showing that would highlight acceptance of diversity in sexual orientation.

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